

Black bears

Why it's important

Black bears have an estimated Ontario population of 100,000, so it's a safe bet that they inhabit any area in which forestry operations such as logging and silviculture are occurring.

Although cases of bear attacks are extremely rare (people are more likely to be struck by lightning), encounters with bears are increasing as the bear population grows and humans go further into bear territory.

The best defence against a bear encounter is knowledge. The more outdoor forestry workers know about bears, their habitat and habits, the better the chance of avoiding them.

How to control the hazards

Personality profile of a black bear

- Black bears are normally shy, but there are three situations in which bears may overcome their natural shyness and become aggressive:
 - If they think their cubs are threatened
 - If they perceive danger
 - If they smell food.

Preventing an encounter with a black bear

- Bears don't like surprises any more than humans do. If a bear is suddenly surprised by a human and senses danger, it may react. So will a bear that thinks its escape route has been cut off — especially a sow with cubs.
- Noise is the best way to let bears know you're around. Air horns have been proven to work. Second-best are other noise-making devices such as whistles.
- Carefully manage food and waste to avoid attracting bears. Garbage storage must be secure and disposal must be safe.

What to do when you encounter a black bear

- Check for cubs. Adult bears are often most dangerous when cubs are nearby.

- Bears will almost always run away from a human encounter as long as they have a clear escape route. Don't stand between a bear and its obvious path to safety.
- The best way out of an encounter with a bear is to back away from it slowly while raising and waving your arms and yelling as loudly as possible.
- If you are attacked by a bear, playing dead is the wrong thing to do. The best way to drive off the bear is to hit it with a stick, stone or anything available while yelling and screaming as loudly as possible.
- In the extremely rare event of an encounter with a predatory bear, the animal may not give any visual warning of its intentions, pressing closer and closer, assessing if it's safe to attack. You should never turn and run in such a situation. You should be aggressive, throw rocks or sticks and make as much noise as you can.
- Once you're clear of the bear, seek shelter in the nearest vehicle, trailer or building.

Show and tell

Discuss your company's policy regarding black bears and how to avoid attracting them to a work site or a camp site.

For tree planters, discuss company policies on garbage handling and disposal, and the importance of keeping food and snacks away from tents and sleeping areas.

It's also important to stress what to do in the event of an encounter — have participants practise waving their arms, shouting and throwing sticks or rocks at an imagined bear.

Emphasize the buddy system — either at the work site or through a means of communication in the case of an emergency.